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AUTHOR Wells, Tracey L.
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ABSTRACT

All too often when issues arise concerning the "underclass," African Americans, and more specifically African American males are disproportionately represented in that description. Black males have been referred to as endangered in areas of education, economics, health and overall self-efficacy. This data would suggest hopelessness in the black male's ability to overcome the multiple obstacles which an oppressive society have placed before him. However, it may be argued that within the context of oppression there are strengths, within the individual and community, which serve as mediating factors and all the African American male to overcome the obstacles which put him at risk. This has been thought of in contemporary terms as self-efficacy. Though this construct is useful, it is limited in scope. By definition, it involves the capability to organize and integrate cognitive, social and behavioral skills into courses of action to serve innumerable purposes. A more culturally appropriate term to define the mechanism through which the black male copes with oppression may be "learned effectiveness." This construct may be defined as an integration of one's sense of self (self-efficacy and self-esteem), one's orientation to African American culture (racial identity and world view), and one's orientation to dominant culture (perceptions of racism/oppression and acculturation), in the formation of a culturally specific coping mechanism. The purpose of the present study is to conduct preliminary research focused on empirical validation of the construct of learned effectiveness, while contributing to a body of literature on positive copy styles of African Americans. This study seeks to establish construct and criterion validity for learned effectiveness as well as investigate intragroup variability on measures of this construct. (Author)

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Learned Effectiveness: An Empirical Validation

Tracey L. Wells

California School of Professional Psychology

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Abstract

All too often when issues arise concerning the "underclass", African Americans, and more specifically African American Males, are disproportionately represented in that description. Black Males have been referred to as endangered in areas of education, economics, health and overall self efficacy. This data would suggest hopelessness in the Black males's ability to overcome the multiple obstacles which an oppressive society have placed before him. However, it may be argued that within the context of oppression there are strengths, within the individual and community, which serve as mediating factors and allow the African American male to overcome the obstacles which put him at risk. This has been thought of in contemporary terms as self efficacy. Though this construct is useful, it is limited in scope. By definition, it involves the capability to organize and integrate cognitive, social and behavioral skills into courses of action to serve innumerable purposes. A more culturally appropriate term to define the mechanism through which the Black male copes with oppression may be "learned effectiveness." This construct may be defined as an integration of ones sense of self (self efficacy and self esteem), ones orientation to African American Culture (Racial identify and world view), and ones orientation to dominant culture

(perceptions of racism/oppression and acculturation), in the formation of a culturally specific coping mechanism. The purpose of the present study is to conduct preliminary research focused on empirical validation of the construct of learned effectiveness, while contributing to a body of literature on positive coping styles of African American. This study seeks to establish construct and criterion validity for learned effectiveness as well as investigate intragroup variability on measures of this construct.

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

What's happening with Black men? This question has been asked by social scientists as well as lay persons. What's happening with Black men? If one turns to the media for this answer, one may be led to believe that they are all gang members, all unemployed or all incarcerated. All dangerous unproductive people.

But what's really happening with Black men? The social sciences have attempted to address this question through academic research. However research in academic psychology has been strongly influenced by the doctrine that human differences result from caused within people rather than forces in society. With this belief, all of the social ills that plague Black americans can be seen as a direct result of inherent inadequacies of Blacks themselves. The overt manifestation of this school of thought is the deficit model which has been used to explain much of the group and individual behavior of African Americans.

Implications for the treatment of African Americans in psychological literature range far beyond the scope of academia. Deficit model literature as previously stated allows for "blaming the victim" while no responsibility for social conditions is taken by the system. If African Americans can be viewed as inherently inferior by

dominant cultural standards, cycles of racism, oppression and white supremacy can remain intact and unchallenged.

Gibbs (1988), states that Black men have been miseducated by the educational system mishandled by the criminal justice system mislabeled by the mental health system and mistreated by the social welfare system. She summarized the state of African American men in the United States in terms of six social indicators: education, employment delinquency/crime, substance abuse, unwed teenage parenthood, and an homicide/suicide. In the arena of education, 20% of the young Black men in the 12-17 age range are unable to read at a fourth grade level. In 1987 unemployment among Black youth was twice the rate of unemployment among all teenagers. This rate affected one third to one half of the nations young Black males. In the area of crime, on any given day the state prison populations contain more than five percent of all Black men in twenties, and 42% of the inmate population is Black. The overall substance usage rate among Black youth is lower than that of whites, however, the usage of heroine and crack cocaine is disproportionately high among older Black male youth. Though much is not known about the impact of teen age parenthood on Black males, it has been established that these boys are likely to attain a lower educational level and lower occupational status, have larger families, and experience unstable

marriages. Homicide is the leading cause of death for Black male teens and young adults. A Black male has a one in twenty-one chance of being murdered before he reaches age 25. Lastly, the suicide rate for Black males nearly tripled between 1977 and 1982.

It is clear form this data that African American males are an at risk population. But with all of this going on, some still survive. But, how? Clearly there is a need for a unifying theory on the functioning of African American males. This theory should not be deficit oriented and should address issues relevant to the success of the endangered African American male.

The proposed study offers a construct, learned effectiveness, around which a comprehensive theory of African American male coping can be built. The purpose of this research is to focus on strengths within the individual and African American culture which may mediate the Black males ability to cope with obstacles of oppression. In addition this construct serves to counteract deficit model literature, expand on cultural difference model research, while proposing a culturally relevant explanation for adaptive functioning within the African American male population.

Review of the Literature

In reviewing literature on self perception and coping, several components were identified as being vital to the construct of learned effectiveness. Learned effectiveness is hypothesized to be composed of three primary dimensions: sense of self, orientation to African African culture and orientation to dominant culture. Within each dimension, there are specific components which constitute that dimensions existence. The sense of self dimension is composed of self efficacy and self esteem. Orientation to African American culture is composed of world view and racial identity. The components of the third dimension, orientation the dominant culture, is composed of awareness/perceptions of racism and acculturation.

Sense of Self

The first component of the sense of self dimension is self efficacy. Bandura (1989) describes self efficacy as the capability to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to exercise control over environmental events. This ability, often referred to as perceived self efficacy, is partially governed by how capable or competent one perceives himself to be in prospective situations. On the surface this construct appears to have sufficient explanatory power for aspect of human behavior. However, this term

may be limited in scope. It implies that if one has sufficient cognitive abilities, ambitions, and positive self perceptions successful outcomes are more or less inevitable. No consideration is given to systemic inequalities or cultural differences.

There is research which indicates that blacks do tend to score low on measures of self efficacy (Hunt and Hunt, 1977; Hughes and Demo, 1989). An explanatory summary of this phenomena is that it is a result of the negative introjects of an oppressive society. If this is true, merely changing the perceptions of African Americans is insufficient for producing efficacious behavior.

With this in mind the component of self esteem was added to the sense of self dimension as that which may interact with self efficacy to offset negative introjects of oppression. Literature (Hughes and Demo, 1989) in this area posits three theoretical principles of self esteem. First, reflected appraisal indicates that a persons self esteem is a product of how that person believes others see him. The second, social comparison, proposes that self esteem is in part a product of one comparing himself to others and making positive or negative self evaluations. The third, self attribution, holds that self esteem results from persons observing their own behavior and characteristics, especially

successes and failures.

Based on these principles of self esteem it should be assumed that African Americans will have a low self esteem. However, the guiding assumption behind each of these principles is that dominant culture is the reference group for all cultures upon which self esteem is based. Rosenburg (1981), suggests that this assumption is erroneous. For Black self esteem to be effected by negative attitudes of whites, Blacks must accept these attitudes and consider them to be relevant and significant.

In many instances research has indicated little or no difference in the self esteem between African Americans and European Americans, and in some cased found African American self esteem to be higher (Powell, 1983). Even with these positive results, literature fails to make strong arguments for the relationship of high self esteem to positive life outcomes. This points to factors in addition to self esteem and self efficacy which may contribute to ones ability to maneuver through an oppressive environment. Hence, the addition of the dimensions of orientation to African American culture and orientation to dominant culture.

Orientation to African American Culture

The first component of orientation to African

American culture is world view. World view is defined as how a person perceives his relationship to the world within the context of his cultural upbringing and life experiences (Sue, 1978). Studies (Baldwin and Hopkins, 1990; Montgomery, Fine and James-Myers, 1990) indicate that there is, in fact, a difference in world view systems between African Americans and European Americans, that is not attributable to deficits.

The basic assumption underlying the African american world view reflects the notion of unity, oneness and spirituality while the European american world view reflect individuality dichotomy and antagonism. This African American conceptual system may serve as the grounding force when faced with day to day struggles. If one follows this world view system, the way in which on approaches the world may be inherently more effective than alternative means of dealing with the environment. That is, it may be more adaptive and effective to come form a place of sharing and cooperating as opposed to conquering and controlling.

The second component of orientation to African American culture is racial identity. Black racial identity has been defined in terms of a process by which one becomes black. To become black, or nigrescence, is a psychological metamorphosis where one emerges into Black consciousness (Cross, Parham and Helms, 1991).

Several stage models have been proposed to trace the development of Black racial identity (Thomas, 1971; Cross, 1971). In summary of these, one moves from a point of racial unawareness or negative self perceptions, to some awareness accompanied by discomfort, to high awareness with withdrawal into blackness, and finally into comfort and acceptance of self and other races. These models have helped set a framework for understanding African American identity within the context of racism. They relate to learned effectiveness in that depending on where one falls within the model, racial identity may serve as a mediating factor in warding off negative attributions of dominant culture and therefore assist in successfully coping in a racist society.

Orientation to Dominant Culture

The last dimension of learned effectiveness, orientation to dominant culture, is composed of awareness/perceptions of racism and acculturation. Virtually all African Americans must deal with racism and discrimination due to the high visibility of skin color and the negative cultural meaning of being Black. Perceptions of racism has been talked about in terms of environmental stress in literature (Anderson, 1991; Jones, 1985; Thomas and Sillen, 1972). This stress has

in the past been thought to result in rage, cultural paranoia and psychopathology (Thomas and Sillen, 1972). However, Anderson (1991), posits that racism results in a decision by blacks to assimilate or not. This implies that one is aware of the racism that he/she is faced with, and makes a decision on the means by which to deal with it. Therefore, it is possible and reasonable that the extent to which one is aware of racism the more effectively one may cope with it.

Lastly, Mendoza (1989), defines acculturation in two ways. The first is thought of as the process of acquiring the customs of an alternate culture (monoculturalism), while the second is said to be the process of incorporating the customs of alternative and native cultures (multiculturalism). Typically African Americans have been thought of as monocultural, that is to have totally adopted the norms customs and ideology of dominant culture. However, if one subscribes to the world view literature, where African American world view is distinctly different for European American world view, it stands to reason that this assumption of total acculturation is incorrect.

Using acculturation models, a persons level of immersion into an alternate culture may be determined. Though this ideology was developed primarily for use with Mexican Americans, it may be useful in understanding the

way in which African Americans take on dominant cultural norms, how the two cultures interact, and that process impact on coping.

Individually each of previously stated components offer some insight into the question of Black male functioning. It is clear that none offer a unitary view of effective coping styles for this population. However, taken together as the construct of learned effectiveness, they may be looked as a culturally appropriate conceptualization of an African American male coping mechanism.

This and other theoretical research are needed in order to set the foundation upon which resources may be developed to build support systems, intervention, and prevention programs which will facilitate successful life outcomes for Black men. Of equal or greater importance, this research will contribute to the body of literature on African American men by introducing a framework for future research.

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